

# Our report to you

*A publication of  
Wetaskiwin Regional  
Public Schools*

**Spring | 2014**

## A wonderful cross cultural friendship forged...

**How Cree dancing brought two little girls together**

Grade four student Callah Reid usually enjoys going to school. But one day, when attending an assembly at her school, Ecole Parkdale, she got extra excited about something. She saw some of the other students at the school, students with First Nations heritage, performing Cree dancing.

"I thought it was pretty cool," says Callah. "The way they danced, just caught me. It was beautiful and I loved the sounds of the jingles on Sheree's dress."

After the assembly Callah approached Sheree Joseph, a grade six student. "I asked if I could learn how to do it," recalls Callah.

Sheree started to teach Callah, right there on the playground, at recess. Then, after staff caught wind of the exchange, they set up some dance lessons in the school.

After all, this kind of thing is just what the FNMI (First Nations Metis Inuit) worker and the Family School Liaison (FSL) worker were working towards: increased awareness and celebration of the variety of cultural backgrounds of the students attending their school.

In particular, school staff have been working to ensure First Nations and Metis students feel accepted and as much a part of the school as any other student. So, when the two little girls crossed cultural boundaries, unaware that those boundaries exist for others, it was exciting.

"Sheree is a very good teacher," says Laura Lucas, a Family School Liaison Worker. "She embraces others regardless of their culture or background."

When it came time for a community performance of the Cree dancing at Christmas, Callah was without an appropriate dress for the jingle dance that she had practiced. Sheree gave up her own special jingle dress so her new friend wouldn't miss out.

The school's FNMI worker, Deneen Reti says, "It was such a special moment to see Sheree prepare Callah for the dance; lending the dress and braiding her hair. To see that kids do that was encouraging."

"It made me feel really good," says Sheree recalling what it was like to watch Callah jingle dance. "I like when other people try it. Then I know our culture is going into other people's hands and they are treating it with pride and they respect it."

"Seeing students build a friendship and connection with each other is what we want," says Laura Lucas. "What we see on the playground today, will be hopefully what we see in our community in the future. So, when we see friendships like Sheree and Callah's develop, I feel hope for our community."

**"I like when other people try it. Then I know our culture is going into other people's hands and they are treating it with pride and they respect it."**



**Wetaskiwin  
Regional  
Public Schools**

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## Beyond teaching...

### How WRPS helps students succeed

The world is changing. Classrooms of today are changing too. Compared to when you were a child in school, we have learned a lot about what it takes to help your child be successful at learning in class and at school.

Research is backing what we, as people, have probably known intuitively all along: that students must be well emotionally and physically before they are able to learn and develop properly. Fortunately, awareness about student needs is increasingly a part of what we do at school.

“WRPS is intentional about seeing that emotional and physical needs of children are addressed.

We continually look at what is best for students,” says Brian Taje, Associate Superintendent of Curriculum.

“We can’t expect the best from students in class when they’re hungry or tired, don’t believe they’re safe or feel like they don’t belong. We can say we’re only here to teach or we can do the right thing for students who are disadvantaged. There’s no blame. We’re doing something about it.”

Taje says, “What this involves is schools working with families to make them better places. If we do things right, the result of our work will be students engaged in their schooling. It all comes back to our mandate to support student learning.”

*Three major areas of support within our schools include:*

#### **FNMI programs**

##### **Maskwacis Wahkotowin Liaisons**

Maskwacis Wahkotowin Liaisons are new in WRPS schools this year. Each worker has the primary responsibility for helping First Nations students and their families feel as valued in the school as any other student or individual.

“Parents clearly told us last year the kinds of ways our schools could better understand and support their children,” says Taje.

Maskwacis Wahkotowin Liaisons are advocates for students and families. They are also laboring to establish culturally relevant practices in the schools.

This year, Cree Elders participated in commencement activities at some schools. Other schools hosted Round Dances and students have practiced and performed Cree dances at school. There has been drumming instruction, and Cree arts and craft projects. Cree language clubs have formed. Smudging is also happening in some of the schools.

Taje says, “We’re off to a promising start. However, we need to remember these activities are occurring to support students desiring to attend and be successful at school. They also provide a way for families to get more involved in schools.”

In the past, some of the schools had planned these types of events, but there was not a wide-scale, consistency across the division.

“About a quarter of our student population has a First Nations background,” explains Taje, “and schools are at their best when they reflect the communities they serve. With that in mind, we needed to be more intentional with our work to have these students feel that they are a vital part of our schools.”

##### **Family School Liaison Workers**

“Sometimes personal issues and family issues can be a barrier to learning,” says Brian Taje. “There’s no judgment. Where possible, we want to mitigate the impact at school.”

The role of the Family School Liaison (FSL) located in each school building, is to be the bridge between home and school, and to provide support to families. FSLs can link families to resources available in the community, or provide support themselves.

That support could look like helping a mother develop a bedtime routine for a child, acquiring books for the families to read at home, providing encouragement to make a difficult but healthy decision, and providing counselling.

The bottom line is, “when families are healthy and happy, students are more successful in their learning,” says Taje.

##### **SCHEP School Community Health Education Partnership**

SCHEP had its beginnings about 20 years ago in the jurisdiction. After decades of effort the program has become a part of the WRPS culture.

“It’s not just an activity we do before or after we’re done teaching. It’s an integral part of what we do, and it’s part of who we are,” says Jodi Mattia, WRPS’s program coordinator and a principal in the division.

SCHEP involves a partnership between WRPS and Alberta Health. Each organization provides financial resources, and has an overseeing representative. Each school has a health champion among its staff, responsible for embedding the program’s priorities in the planning and activities of the schools.

##### **SCHEP’s three main priorities are:**

1. Physical well-being = active living
2. Social and emotional well-being = healthy relationships
3. Healthy eating

How a school interprets SCHEP is a local decision. “It’s based on needs at each school,” says Mattia. However, there are some jurisdiction wide activities that reinforce the priorities.

SCHEP has resulted in these types of activities: a leadership conference in the jurisdiction, or students travelling to another location to participate in one. Another example is ensuring the school has a breakfast program if needed, or a hot lunch program that emphasizes healthy food, a change in a school timetable to build in daily physical education, or even a ‘brain break’ / stretch in the middle of a classroom activity. The wide range of activities and opportunities depends on the needs of students.

“For students to achieve their full potential we must make students the centre of all decisions related to learning,” says Terry Pearson, Superintendent, WRPS.



### A note about this publication

In the past, this publication has primarily focused on what teachers do to help children be successful. This publication has taken a step off that path.

Although the work of teachers remains absolutely vital, we wanted to show you some of what we are doing outside of traditional classrooms, all of which is directly tied to student success.

As you read through the pages, you will find examples of each of the three key areas we've just defined. It will give you an idea of the experience individuals students are having, and we hope that it builds support for our efforts.

As a team: community, parents, educators and students, we make a difference for our students.

## A budding politician blooms at Wetaskiwin Composite

When Tabatha Wallace first came to Wetaskiwin Composite High School several years ago, the new grade 10 student was very shy, and kept to herself.

"I didn't know how to make friends," recalls Tabatha. But contrary to that quiet outer appearance, inside was a growing desire to participate in school leadership. "They announced that there would be room representatives from every class, and I thought, that seems like a position for me." So, Tabatha ran and was elected. It was while serving on council that grade 10 year, Vice Principal Jeannette Simpson noticed Tabatha.

"We were chatting with the kids and Tabatha said, 'I would really like to go into political science'". Simpson says given Tabatha's quiet nature she was surprised at the comment, but thought about it later. She considered what opportunities could enhance the young woman's school experience.

"We're here to help the students be successful," says Simpson. "Having the opportunities to be socially successful are just as important as the academic ones; good social skills impact you for the rest of your life."

Wetaskiwin Composite High School, as well as every other school in WRPS, is a part of SCHEP (Student, Community and Health-Education Partnership). SCHEP emphasizes three pillars: healthy eating, active living and healthy relationships. Every school works to set goals in these areas and to find opportunities to help individual students within these areas.

Being given those opportunities for growth is exactly what happened for Tabatha Wallace.

As Simpson thought about Tabatha's comment, she remembered something she felt would be meaningful for Tabatha. And she was right. The student travelled to Ottawa with the Rotary club in grade 10, seeing politics in the capital city up close and personal. The



following year she travelled to Wetaskiwin's twin city in Japan and became involved in the school's friendship society. With all of this exposure and opportunity, Tabatha decided at the end of grade 11 to run in the election for student council president for her grade 12 year. She won.

**"Watching this happen for her has been one of the high points of my career. Seeing her blossom has been incredibly wonderful."**

"I found it thrilling," says Tabatha. "I had been thinking of becoming a

politician before high school, but being on council is what has helped me decide for sure. That's because I know now that I could actually do it."

So far this school year, Tabatha has formed the Straight-Gay Alliance at her school and has become highly involved in drama as well, which she says helps her to speak with confidence in front of others. She's thinking about her future and deciding which university to attend, still aiming at making a career out of politics.

"I've really watched her grow into somebody who is self-assured," says Simpson. "It's exciting. I was able to point her in the right direction, but Tabatha chose to take the steps forward. That's what matters, and it's what we hope for every student."

"Watching this happen for Tabatha has been one of the high points of my career," says Simpson. "Seeing her blossom has been incredibly wonderful."





# Fixing their mistakes

## How a Restorative Justice program is helping students make better choices

Principal Frank Heinrichs, of Griffiths-Scott Middle School in Millet, remembers finding out that junior high students Aric\* and Sherri\* had made some poor choices. Sherri had been caught accepting a drug. Aric had been a sort of accomplice to another student who used a hose to pour water down the school's heating system. Fortunately one of the individuals turned off the water before it caused even bigger damage to the school. Even though both Aric and Sherri's choices were serious, Heinrichs wanted to help.

"They're good kids who both made a mistake," says Heinrichs. "I wanted to give them a chance to change."

So, Heinrichs referred both of the students to a Restorative Justice process. Known to be used by First Nations people, is also effective on a wider scale. According to Heinrichs, "It gives a person who did wrong an emotional connection to what they did, so they can re-enter their society."

Restorative Justice is often more effective than traditional consequences such as suspension or expulsion," says Heinrichs. "We have found that with traditional consequences, the student may repeat the same behavior. Usually with Restorative Justice, the student doesn't make the mistake again."

Describing his experience with Restorative Justice, Aric says, "I sat in a circle in the library with the other kids, my Dad and the other kids' parents. We each had to give our point of view."

Aric says once everyone had spoken, the circle decided together that the students would each have to pay for 16 hours of landscaping charges and each contribute four hours-worth of work.

Aric thinks Restorative Justice is more effective for students than suspension or expulsion.

"Everyone I know that has been suspended has been suspended multiple times, but that isn't true for restorative justice."

"I realized there could have been major damage to the school, and I know I need to think about things more," he says.

Sherri also sees now that she should have made different choices. She remembers the moment when, in the Restorative Justice circle, she had to explain what she had done and why.

"I realized I could have hurt people. I saw that my parents weren't proud of me and disappointed in me. That was the worst part," says Sherri, "but they said everyone makes mistakes and you need to think about what you're doing before you do it."

**"They're good kids who both made a mistake. I wanted to give them a chance to change."**

The Restorative Justice circle decided that Sherri would spend two hours doing community service, including emptying and cleaning garbage cans around the school's exterior. She also received a short suspension, and was assigned to write a page describing what she had learned.

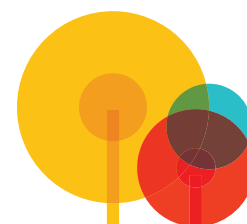
"I realized I shouldn't just do things because other people are telling me to do it," says Sherri. "I'm glad I learned that."

*\*Names have been changed*

### What is Restorative Justice?

According to the Alberta Restorative Justice Association, Restorative Justice is an approach focused on repairing harm when a wrong doing or injustice occurs in a community. Depending on the process or technique used, restorative justice involves the victim, the offender, their social networks, justice agencies, and the community.

All schools in WRPS ensure a positive school climate and healthy relationships through their Comprehensive Counselling Plans and through their Health Action Plans (SCHEP).





## Students at school during time off

### A new program at CB McMurdo School is having a positive impact on students

From the laughter and smiles on the students' faces, you wouldn't know these are children who sometimes struggle with school. The students are a part of a new program that began in the fall of 2013 at CB McMurdo School in Wetaskiwin. The program's goal is to reach students who may have fallen behind in their school work, for whatever reason.

"These are students who want to do well in school, but are struggling to achieve that," says Principal Mike Daly.

Because CB McMurdo operates as a year round school, with one or two week breaks several times a year, the calendar presented an opportunity. While most of the students are on break, a dozen or so students come in three days a week to improve their academic skills.

Daly hires a substitute teacher to help the students during the session. Also, support workers have hours scheduled during that time, including the FNMI (First Nations Metis Inuit) and the Youth Coach, who promote mental health in students and staff. Also, the Family School Liaison Worker comes as she is able during that time period.

The schedule is a lot more relaxed compared to a usual school day. The students choose, as a group, what they'll work on. What usually ends up happening is a mix of physical education, home economics (cooking), and a focus on basic math and reading comprehension. They also work ahead in science so the kids already know some of what they'll be learning once regular school resumes.

Grade seven student Jonas Crier says he signed up to participate because, "I thought it would be fun. It is fun and I'm catching up on stuff I missed. I've also learned that whenever I have homework I need to finish it."

Jo Cooper, a grade nine student, says she struggles to focus and this gets in the way of learning. Also, past life experiences have left her unsure of herself, and afraid to ask for help.

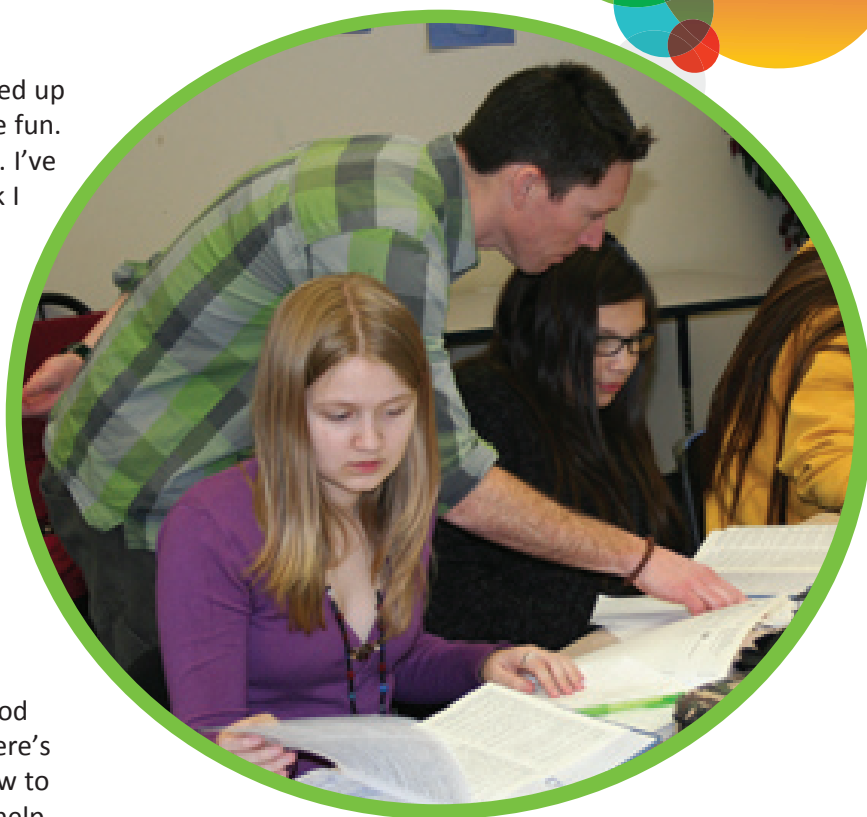
"But when I'm here I can ask questions," says Jo. And while some kids might not feel excited about spending extra time at school, Jo says, "it makes me feel special. Teachers realize I can't learn like everyone else, and they know this helps me. I like that."

Grade seven student Julia Block says, "It's good learning here. With a little group like this, there's more explaining, showing what to do and how to do it. The teacher has time to sit down and help you." And, says Julia, "I like hanging out with these friends." Julia says it's a relief to not have to deal with kids who are sometimes mean, and instead, just be with kids who are ready to be friends.

"We're very pleased with the results for the students who have chosen to participate," says Daly. "We've seen significant improvement in self-esteem and mental wellness, students reporting they feel

**"It makes me feel special. Teachers realize I can't learn like everyone else, and they know this helps me. I like that."**

more connected to the school and to learning, as well as less absenteeism. We've also seen improvement in behavior."



Academic improvement happens while the students are attending the session, but it doesn't always translate once regular school resumes. However, Daly thinks it's just a matter of time before the school will start seeing that impact as well.

"We're doing this because we care about the students," says Daly. "We believe as we build skills and confidence these students can turn the corner in their learning. It only makes sense that emotions need to be dealt with first. That's the whole idea behind the supports we've got in place in WRPS. They're there to help students succeed."



## Removing emotional barriers to learning

When you look at her, all you see is a beautiful and happy young lady. You wouldn't guess that all last year, and even just a few months ago the Buck Mountain School - grade nine student, Amy Seely, was struggling to feel happy and was regularly frustrated and overwhelmed by school.

"I had test anxiety, and there was bullying," recalls Amy. "I wanted to fix everything and make it better. It felt frustrating that I didn't have control of that."

"The frustration and anxiety affected my grades, and I didn't have a lot of close friends," says Amy. "I felt sad and down, and it affected me at home."

Teri Boyce, Family School Liaison Worker, realized Amy was having a hard time, and started to meet with her.

"I've been seeing Teri for a while," says Amy. "She's helped me develop coping skills." Amy

**"What I've learned is that I make myself happy and I'm not responsible for others' happiness. I've learned how you react to a situation is your own choice."**

says those skills have developed through a variety of techniques and tools Teri had her try - such as: brain mapping, journaling, positive self-talk, writing affirmations on her bathroom mirror, and EFT (a technique called emotional freedom technique that involves tapping your fingers in a particular way on your hands).

"After a while, I started feeling better about myself. I started standing up for myself," says Amy, "and I started doing better in school."

"I think my processing skills are better, and I can see challenges now without making them bigger than they really are."

"What I've learned," reflects Amy, "is that I make myself happy and I'm not responsible for others' happiness. I've learned how you react to a situation is your own choice. And I've learned that people can say what they say, but it doesn't make it true."



Boyce says, "Amy's growth has been amazing."

"Amy's confidence and self-esteem are higher. Once she realized she could decide her own responses to situations, that was the key," says Boyce. "Many teachers have commented about the change in Amy, and how positive it has been for her learning."

"It's important to recognize that Amy needed to do the work," says Boyce. "This process was hard work over the last year but Amy didn't want to stay feeling the same way. Because she put in the effort to change, she has been very successful."

Of course, Amy has, like most teens her age, experiences challenges from time to time. "But now, instead of being in tears, she comes into my office and calmly asks questions," says Boyce. "She's much better at handling challenges than in the past."

## Maskwacis Wahkotowin Liaison reaches out to families

It's easy to pick up on the easy and happy friendship between Justine Jacques and Latisha Dingman. The two women came together over a common goal... helping Jacques' son AJ succeed at school.

"Justine is a very special person," says Latisha. Justine says, "Latisha is a like a second Mom. She gives me really good advice, and when I talk to her I go away feeling better. Dingman is the Maskwacis Wahkotowin Liaison for Centennial School in Wetaskiwin. As such, she

helps the parents of students in a variety of ways so that they can be successful as parents, and families, and so they can feel comfortable working with the school. That's important because evidence shows effective parents and families make a difference in how well children can learn.

Dingman helped Jacques help AJ be more prepared for school in a number of ways, including suggestions for a bedtime routine.

She also talks over Jacques' concerns and challenges and helps Jacques have the confidence to make positive and healthy choices.

"I gained a lot of support from Latisha," says Jacques. "It brings better things out in me. I have more confidence in myself as a Mom."

Dingman says, "She's come out of her shell and is making excellent choices for herself and her son. I can see her confidence growing all the time. It's really wonderful."



## Smudging at school

**How a traditional First Nations practice helps students**

Zander Johnson recently had some hard things happen to him outside of school. Knowing the grade five student had these emotional challenges, Kristy Strong, who wears both the Family School Liaison and the Maskwacis Wahkotowin Liaison hats at Norwood School, reached out to help. Believing that emotional wellness helps a student learn better, Strong was concerned.

"It was harder for Zander to come to school and to focus when he was here," she recalls. "As a trained counselor, I tried everything I knew to do. None of it was very effective."

Then Strong offered Zander the opportunity to smudge, a practice that First Nations people believe is cleansing and calming. It involves the burning of sweetgrass or sage, along with cleansing like movements with the hands, moving smoke from sweetgrass or sage over the body. Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools approved the practice within its schools in the fall of 2013.

"At first Zander wasn't sure about it, probably because it was only something he had done at home before," says Strong.

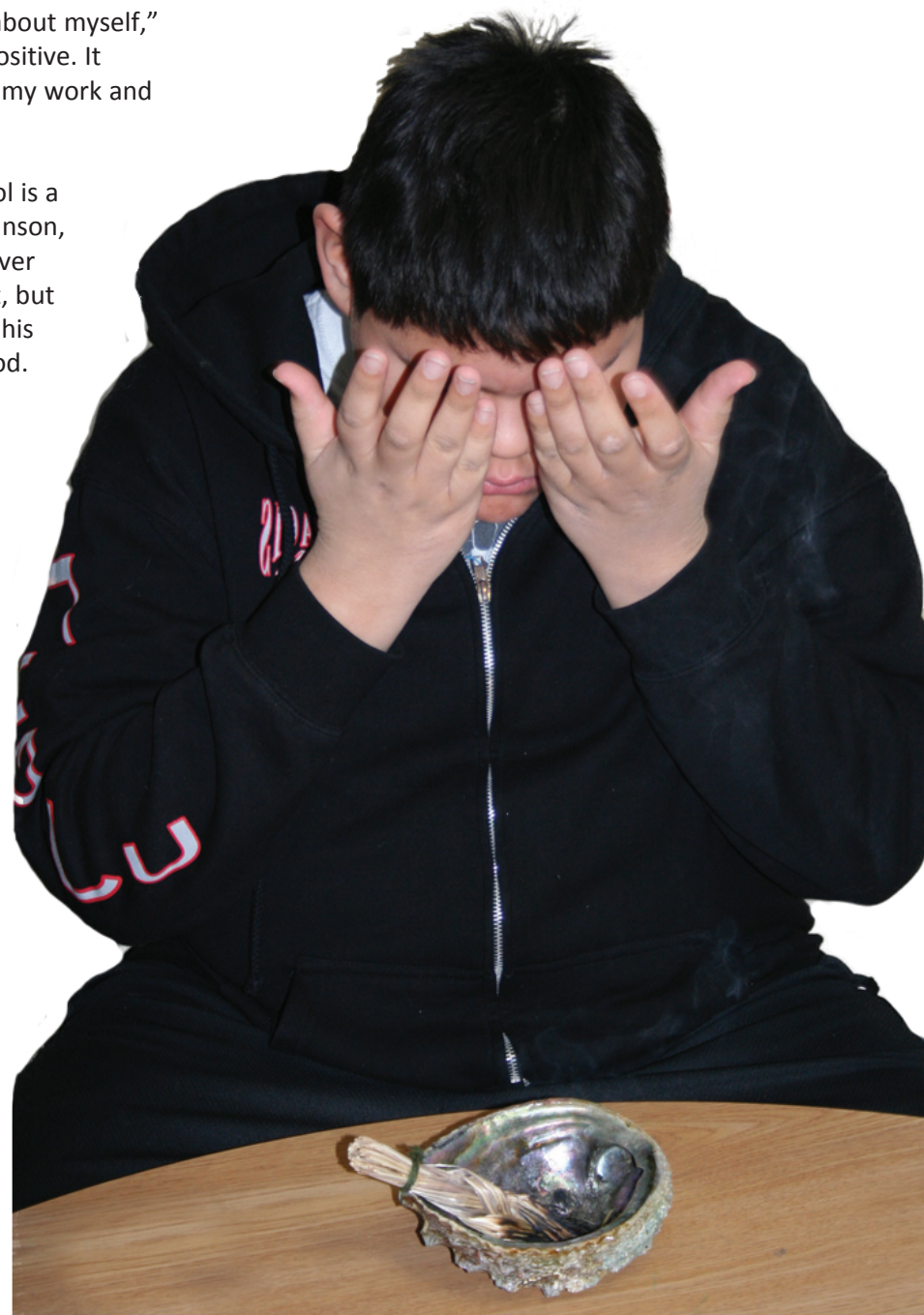
"But after a while he started bringing in his own Sweetgrass and that's when I knew this was something important for him. Now Zander comes to my office to smudge every day, and sometimes more if he feels the need."

"It makes me feel better about myself," says Zander, "and more positive. It helps me concentrate, do my work and think."

"I think smudging at school is a good idea," says Barry Johnson, Zander's Dad. "I would never even have thought of that, but to have him look towards his culture makes me feel good. He needs to know where he comes from."

Counselor Strong is pleased too. "He always has a smile on his face after a smudge, and then shows a stronger focus once he's back in the classroom," says Strong.

"And Zander is proud that he was the first student to smudge at our school. It's good to see he has pride in his culture," says Strong.





# OUR REPORT TO YOU



**Wetaskiwin  
Regional  
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## Kindergarten registration is now underway

Kindergarten is an important milestone and the beginning of a lifelong, learning journey. Your child has a promising future ahead and we hope you will give us an opportunity to nurture his or her social, physical and intellectual growth.

If your child turns five years old on or before December 31, 2014 they are eligible to attend kindergarten in the fall. It is time right now to pick up the 'getting ready for kindergarten' application package – available at all WRPS elementary schools.

Once you've picked up a package, and filled in the forms, please come to the kindergarten application night at your school. Detailed information is included in the package or available on our website:

[www.wrps.ab.ca/kindergarten](http://www.wrps.ab.ca/kindergarten)

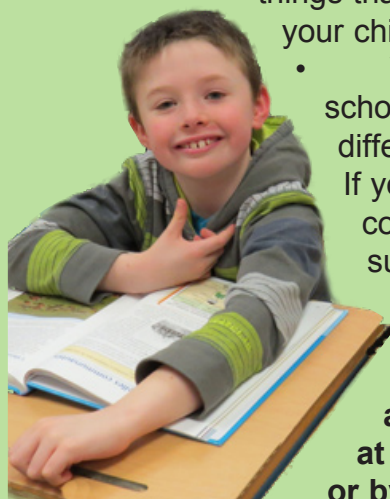


## WE LOVE GOOD NEWS! Do you have some to share?

Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools is extremely proud of the many accomplishments of its students, teachers and many staff members.

Working with parents we are making a difference for students. Within this publication, we have featured many good news stories. We recognize that there are many similar success stories that have not been told yet, and we want to hear about them! For example:

- When your child was struggling with something challenging - at school or otherwise - did a teacher or another staff member's efforts make things better?
  - Did your child feel particularly inspired or motivated by a specific assignment or activity at school?
  - Did a teacher or an entire school adopt a new way of doing things that made school an exciting place for your child?
    - Was there a time in your child's schooling when the teacher made a big difference?
- If you know of such a story, please contact us. By sharing stories of success, we make WRPS a better place for kids!



**You can contact Sherry Knull  
at 780-352-6018 or toll free  
at 1-877-352-8078  
or by e-mail at: [knulls@wrps.ab.ca](mailto:knulls@wrps.ab.ca)**

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### We welcome your feedback!

If you have any comments, ideas or suggestions about this publication, please contact Sherry Knull at [knulls@wrps.ab.ca](mailto:knulls@wrps.ab.ca). Call 780-352-6018 or toll free: 1-877-352-8078.

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